

Tess

He always knew his beguiling wife would leave him one day, but he still had his daughter and life had to go on...

story by Pippa Kelly

Daddy, daddy! Over here!" Leonie and I are in the butterfly house, among the flowers and dusty wings, which brush our cheeks as softly as fleeting souls. She is crouched, watching a flash of turquoise that has alighted on a leaf. I walk over and my shadow – or something else – scares the exquisite creature away, up into the dappled branches.

I expect Leonie to blame me for this, but she is off, the sequins on the back of her T-shirt catching the sun as she darts over to where a cloud of palest pink is rising into the air, wings working as simply, perfectly, silently as my own eyelids.

Leonie and I come here every Sunday. It was her idea and I wasn't sure at first. It seemed too clichéd: the sad, single dad and his daughter. But now our weekly visit to this fragile, fluttering place has become a ritual we wouldn't miss for the world.

Watching Leonie running and laughing – seeing that life must and does go on – has helped me come to terms with what's happened. I realise now, strange as it may seem, that from the moment I fell in love with Leonie's beguiling mother, I knew that our happiness wouldn't last, that Tess would one day escape.

To begin with, I didn't think she'd even notice me. She was long-legged and exotic, with a touch of Nepalese in her blood and a passion for travel.

I can see her now, camera over her shoulder, long, black hair swinging as she walks towards me at Heathrow a month after we met. She'd been away on an assignment. "Longest week of my life," she whispered as I felt her breath on my face.

I'd never wooed a woman as I wooed Tess. The pursued and the pursuer, my mate Ian called it. He was still reeling from his divorce, bitter as hell and full of warnings. But I wasn't listening.

Tess. A woman as strong and

singular as her name, a woman whose eyes bewitched me, whose life intrigued me. Her photographs opened windows to another world: her words took me there.

I knew she wouldn't want to be pinned down by marriage. She was my love, the woman who brought the four-letter word to my cynical lips for the first time. But surely not my wife? Ian agreed. "She's trouble mate, believe me – not cut out for the long haul. Enjoy it while you can."

But, in her characteristically surprising way, it was Tess who suggested it. She was talking about Jaipur, describing how colours and objects looked so much sharper there. "Sometimes when I'm in London, everything seems slightly fuzzy, out of focus," she said. She wanted to cement what we had.

It would be our 10th anniversary this month. Standing in the butterfly house, it feels like yesterday. In my mind, I'm there now, waiting at the altar of St John's, willing myself not to look round. A breeze of expectation rustles the congregation and I turn. For a moment, with the sun behind her, she is no more than a silhouette beside her stooping father. As the two figures slowly advance, my eyes lock with hers.

To this day, I cannot remember saying our vows, but her eyes, the inky pools in which I drowned the first time we met, remain with me.

"Come!" It's a whispered command from Leonie, who's gingerly walking towards me, arms outstretched. On one of them is a dazzling yellow butterfly. I instantly recall how magical it feels when one of these creatures chooses to alight, even momentarily, on you.

And I see Tess, holding Leonie in her arms, her curtain of hair cloaking the tiny golden head. I hate hospitals, but when our daughter was born, I could have knelt and kissed the Dettolled tiles. I wanted

to burst into song, to proclaim to the world how clever I was to have been promoted to dad.

In the blink of an eye, I'm saying goodbye as I leave for work. It's Leonie's first day at school. Her blazer sleeves cover her hands, hiding her nerves. I am so proud. Tears well in my eyes and I walk away, not wanting to undo us both.

A few weeks later I arrive home to find Tess in the kitchen. She sits, still as a picture, and I know at once that something is wrong. Although I've steeled myself for this moment for so long, I'm not ready for what she says.

But when she looks up, the eyes that first enchanted me cannot lie. Our worlds have shifted on their axes, and everything is out of control.

In the next few months, it's Leonie who steers me towards a destination I never want to reach and shows me, simply by being there, that a future without Tess is bearable.

It must be true what they say about beauty coming from within because, throughout it all – and it

was mercifully quick – Tess never seemed more beautiful. When clumps of hair came away in her hand, she joked about tattooing her bald head. As her slim limbs withered to those of an old woman, she said she'd finally found the perfect diet, but wondered who would buy the book.

When the end came, it was unexpectedly peaceful, almost sublime. Leonie and I were in the room. In the hospice gardens, spring lilacs shed scented white tears. From out of a washed, blue sky came a Red Admiral. It swooped through the window and poised, delicate as a dewdrop, on my arm. Then, swiftly as it came, it flew away, soft as a soul departing.

"Let's go!" Leonie tugs my hand. I look down at her upturned face and for a heartstopping moment, perhaps because of the way the light catches her cheek, or maybe it's the tilt of her head, I see a glimpse of Tess. Then she moves, and it's gone. **S**

